

Michael LaTrace interviewed by Jaime Lopez

Jaime: I've spoken to you a lot about this project already. A lot of it has to do with conversations that we have on the job and how it gets into each other and a lot of times we split apart, so this is kind of like honoring those conversations.

Michael: I see.

Jaime: I want to introduce you because you've been my foreman for over a decade now.

Michael: Yeah.

Jaime: You've seen me when I first came into-

Michael: A mere [00:00:30] child, you were a mere child.

Jaime: And we've gotten along really well and I've learned a lot from you over the years.

Michael: Well thank you very much.

Jaime: I'm happy that you're able to participate.

Michael: It's my pleasure actually.

Jaime: Michael, would you start off by telling us your name and your job title?

Michael: My name is Michael LaTrace, I am a General Foreman at Two Penn, One Penn Plaza in Manhattan in New York City.

Jaime: You're a journeyman, electrician?

Michael: A journeyman electrician.

Jaime: [inaudible 00:00:58] right?

Michael: [00:01:00] Yes.

Jaime: Michael, can you tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born, where your parents are from?

Michael: Well I was born and raised in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York. I was born in 1955, so it was a very interesting time. It was a wonderful neighborhood environment to grow up in. It was mostly an Italian neighborhood and based around very religious area. [00:01:30] Our church was Our Lady of Mt. Carmel church. I went to their Catholic school there, their elementary school. It was a wonderful, wonderful church because in the summer, they had a really big feast and to this day, they still dance, they call giglio, which means lily in Italian. Every July they have a feast to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, which is our Blessed Mother and they still have it going on. Actually that was my first job ever. My first job ever was at [00:02:00] the feast, and I was peeling onions was my first job.

Jaime: Peeling onions at the feast, very cool.

Michael: The neighborhood changed slightly as we got older and around 1969, we moved to New Jersey, Cedar Grove, New Jersey, I attended high school there, so it was quite a culture shock to go from an urban environment to a rural one. That took some adjustment, but in the [00:02:30] long run, I'm very happy and right now I live in Clifton, New Jersey. Small house, and married and I have two children, a son and a daughter. My daughter's married, she's 30, and my son, he's 27, he lives at home, which I doubt if he'll ever leave.

Jaime: Mike, where are you parents from?

Michael: My parents are also from Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Born in Brooklyn. My grandparents are from Italy.

Jaime: [00:03:00] Mike, what are some of your hobbies?

Michael: Well, actually electrical work is about my only hobby. As you know when you get married and you have children, you have to focus on their needs, so to be perfectly honest with you, I work and that's about it.

Jaime: I have inside information that you have a garden that you take care of. Can you tell us about your garden?

Michael: That is my [00:03:30] only solstice. Every year I like to have a vegetable garden and I grow probably, self-proclaimed of course, probably the best tomatoes in northern New Jersey. Also, I have a couple of fig trees, and these fig trees, one of them is a cutting of a tree that my grandfather brought from Italy. Right now, it's a battle

between the squirrels and I, to see who comes out with the most figs at the end of the year. But yeah, I guess that would be my hobby. [00:04:00] That would be my stress reliever.

Jaime: Going away from your hobbies, but staying within the realm of your work, can you tell me about the last 40 years or so in your career, where you started, and how it's gone over the years.

Michael: Well it's very interesting, I started in 1975 was my initiation date, and my first shop was [00:04:30] a two man shop in Ridgewood, Queens. It was a journeyman and me as an apprentice on the truck. It was baptism by fire actually, and looking back it was probably the best year of my apprenticeship because I learned so much in that one year because we were the whole shop. We did everything from an outlet to services, it was quite interesting, it really was.

Jaime: What shop was that?

Michael: That was called [Cruck 00:05:00] [00:05:00] Electric, Laconia Avenue and White Plains Road in Ridgewood, Queens.

Jaime: You remember your first day in the business?

Michael: Yes, vividly.

Jaime: Can you explain or describe some of the things that happened that day?

Michael: Well I probably I didn't sleep a wink the night before and I had all my new tool bag and my new boots and my new jeans and shirts and everything and I drove to Queens from New Jersey [00:05:30] and I remember parking and I was so nervous going in to see the contractor for the first time. Once I was in the ... a couple of hours into it, I calmed down a bit and I was amazed by the diversity of this industry, how there's not just one nut and bolt, there's hundreds of nuts and bolts. I really took to it. I had a very good journeyman [00:06:00] who taught me the business, who took time to teach me how to bend pipe and so right from then on, I just really took a liking to the industry.

Throughout my career I've met nothing but gentlemen in the business. I tried to carry that on as a journeyman to teach my apprentices the correct way of doing it, but over the years, you learn, [00:06:30] you work with different people and you pick up their nuances. That's what I did. Out of everyone I worked with, I tried to pick up their best quality as an electrician and use that in my career, and use that to teach my other apprentices, like yourself.

Jaime: Thank you Michael.

Michael: You're welcome.

Jaime: You said your first job was peeling onions-

Michael: Yes.

Jaime: ... at the fair-

Michael: At the feast.

Jaime: At the feast, sorry, I want to know about the other jobs you had before you came into the electrical industry-

Michael: Oh my God.

Jaime: Remember them or-

Michael: Yes, [00:07:00] I remember them. Actually the best job I ever had, I'm going to go to that one first, for three years, I was a lifeguard. I believe those were the best three years of my entire life. I truly enjoyed it and I was a milkman for a couple of summers. I would work from 11 o'clock at night to 7 in the morning delivering milk, and coming from the city, delivering milk in the country, in the rural areas was quite frightening because [00:07:30] I didn't know about raccoons and possums and these other things, so it was an interesting job, it really was. Believe it or not, for one summer, Italians, we love the, we have this one cheese we call mozzarella and for one summer, I made mozzarella cheese, it was interesting. Making mozzarella, you have to put your hands in very hot water, so when I first started, I could barely touch the water. By the end of the summer, I was a [00:08:00] pro.

Jaime: Go right in.

Michael: Right into it. It was good. I was a busboy in restaurants, I did a lot. My uncles were always, they were in the business also. I had an uncle that was a contractor, I learned a lot from him, but in the summer as a child in Brooklyn, I would sort screws, I would recoil wire, I don't want to say this, but we would refurbish our [00:08:30] old switches and paint them gray again. That was my initiation into the business.

Jaime: How did you become an electrician?

Michael: Again from it being in my family and my uncle, my uncle, John LaTrace, he was one of the first a-telephone journeymen. In 1963, they started the a-telephone division in Local 3 and he came from Bell Telephone and he pretty [00:09:00] much was kind of my mentor when it came to unionism. He taught me the difference between a

non-union and union workers. The benefits, the safety, so I did learn a lot from him and he was a great man.

Jaime: Did these jobs that you had as a milkman, as a lifeguard, did they help you transition into the electrical industry as well?

Michael: Yes, definitely, just interacting with people and this [00:09:30] way dealing with the customer and other journeymen and apprentices on the job, yeah, it taught me I guess people skills.

Jaime: So you said you got experiences through this contractor, but how did you get into Local 3?

Michael: Well, I waited on line, I filled out an application and I waited on line overnight, and it took a couple of years and they called me, and [00:10:00] I was able to pass the test, and I'm sure with a bit of help from my uncle with the questions and the procedures. That helped me to get in and it was probably one of the greatest things that ever happened to me in my life. Thank God for Harry Van Arsdale and Local 3.

Jaime: You said your uncle was-

Michael: My Uncle John was a-telephone.

Jaime: You have any other family in the business?

Michael: [00:10:30] Yes I do. A couple of my cousins are in the business, and they had a wonderful career. Actually, I'm the youngest out of them all, so I'm the last LaTrace in Local 3.

Jaime: We're working at Two Penn Plaza, One Penn, 11 Penn Plaza, Penn Station area. Can you describe your regular day?

Michael: Okay, it starts, I'm in the city by [00:11:00] quarter after six in the morning and my day starts around 6:30. I'll get my paperwork ready and whatever material that we need for the day's jobs I get together, and then at 7 o'clock, I'll visit the job sites, lay out the jobs to the men, and take it from there. What I'll do is I'll visit other job sites, do paperwork, time sheets, order material. Before you know it, it's time to go home.

Jaime: [00:11:30] About ordering material, I've learned from you that it's quite complex to order material. Can you explain to me the ideas behind when you order material what you look for and how you do it?

Michael: What I look for is I look for a quality part. I find that getting the catalogs from the vendors, like 3M or Greenlee, I find that using that as a reference point gives you again, we have this diverse business, [00:12:00] so there's not one junction box, there's hundreds of junction boxes, so by having the catalogs and going through the material and see what's available, that gives me a better handle on what to order, and we're very lucky at Forest Electric to have a good purchasing department, they're very knowledgeable, so if there's some ambiguity in the parts that I like to order, I call them with questions. For [00:12:30] example, I'm doing a data job right now, and the customer requested that we use a green punch down tool. Now unfortunately, my data experience is limited, so what I did was I called a vendor through our purchasing department and he clarified exactly what it was. It's not really a punch down tool, it's more like a hand crimper, so 42 years in the business, and I learn something new every [00:13:00] day, so it's quite interesting.

Jaime: Mike, can you tell me more about your learning process at work? You said that a journeyman once taught you and you learn something every day. How do you learn best?

Michael: I learn best by actually watching someone perform the task and I probably as the biggest pest in the world, because when we're putting in whatever we're doing, a conduit run or whatever it is, [00:13:30] I ask a million questions. That was one of the things my uncle taught me, he said, "Even if you think you're annoying the person that you're working with, if you don't understand it, just ask questions, ask a million questions." To this day, I still do.

Jaime: This area that you work for, can you tell me some of the vendors, some of the customers that you interact with? What are your favorite customers and [00:14:00] what are your relationships like?

Michael: Well probably my favorite customer is Vornado Realty. We do quite a bit of work for them and they're a wonderful company to work for, they're very fair. What I like is they lean towards union contractors, which is a good thing, and over the years, I've developed a personal relationship with them and they've actually come to count on me. They know when they [00:14:30] give me a job to do, they know I'll do it my best of my ability, and they'll be no problems.

Jaime: So you built this relationship with them, when you go into these spaces, can you describe the spaces in Vornado buildings? How they look and how do you enter and what's your surrounding look like?

Michael: Normally, we're limited to freight entrance, we'll come in through the freight [00:15:00] and over the years, you get to know all the elevator operators, the porters, and everything. So normally we would enter a job and we would start with the

demo, we do our disconnects and once a job has been cleaned off, then we would hang temps, and then we would start the layout of the job. We'd get the prints, and we'd start the layout of the job. The GC, I've had no problems with, they've been pretty cooperative, [00:15:30] once they get to know you and you build a relationship, you've done a couple of jobs with them, it makes things a lot easier.

Jaime: Tell me about your coworkers, what's your relationship with your coworkers?

Michael: When I first came into the business, you kind of develop a special bond with certain people, and over the years, there was this one gentleman, his name's Tommy [Pellatieri 00:15:58]. When [00:16:00] I was a young foreman, he was my partner and I've learned so much from him, and I'll say it to this day, and it's a boxing terminology, pound for pound, he was the best journeyman in Local 3 that I ever worked with. I've seen this gentleman create hangars and straps and conduit runs that I figured were almost impossible to get in, but he bent [00:16:30] the pipe and he looked at the route and he was an amazing human being as a person and an excellent, excellent journeyman and I credit a lot of my knowledge now to him, to him, he was a really good guy.

Jaime: What work do you feel most comfortable doing? What do you feel you most excel in?

Michael: I would say just basic ... data, I'm [00:17:00] still in the learning stage. I wished when I was an apprentice I learned a little bit more about it, but unfortunately, I was in the construction worker mode, and I liked the big, heavy work, so I would say maybe like a big service, or a switch gear room with big conduits and heavy wire, that was my ultimate. Now that I'm getting older, I don't mind little build outs on a floor [00:17:30] or a floor with just basic power and lighting office.

Jaime: Keep it-

Michael: Keep it a little simple for me and not as physical anymore.

Jaime: What would you say that are some of the skills necessary to do your job?

Michael: Well, first of all, you have to have wonderful people skills, and second of all, you need a grasp of the industry. You have to know exactly first of all, the task [00:18:00] that you're doing and how long it's going to take. I don't see how you could be a foreman without prior experience in the field, so definitely to become a good foreman, you have to spend quite a bit of time as a journeyman.

Jaime: Has your work ever felt creative in nature, maybe artistic?

Michael: Yes, definitely. Getting back to Tommy Pellatieri, every job that we did, we signed [00:18:30] our name on it, be it in a conduit cover or on top of a fixture, that's how proud we are of our installation. Yeah, and I do feel that electrical work, especially conduit work, is artistic in an abstract way.

Jaime: Can you tell me more about Tommy Pellatieri, 'cause I know that you guys worked on a lot of installations in this area before [00:19:00] I met you-

Michael: Yes.

Jaime: ... and I remember you telling me about this one installation up the block on 34th Street where I think it's split action. Can you tell me about that job? I always hear you speak about it.

Michael: That job was very complex. This was like let's say I'm going back 15 years, and during that time, there was absolutely no ceiling in this floor, so we had to do everything with exposed conduit and they didn't like offsets, [00:19:30] so we had to pretty much follow the columns and the beams around, so it was quite intricate work, and very interesting. The architect was very demanding. Normally I like to be within a quarter inch of my drawings and everything, this gentleman, we had to be within a sixteenth of everything, so he was quite particular and it was quite a challenge. Again, I had to bite my tongue a lot. But at [00:20:00] the end of the day, I did learn a lot. I did learn a lot and honed my skills as a foreman, interacting with the architect that was very picky, and again, doing the installation with Tommy Pellatieri, who taught me a bunch of tricks when it came to running tubing, and supporting it.

Jaime: What was the store itself, it was just a shoe store? Because I remember you saying you were working [00:20:30] on the roof as well.

Michael: Well it was a shoe store as well, Foot Action, but also for Vornado, they owned the building and we did two sign towers that were on top of the building. I would say the sign towers, they took two 400 amp services for each one. I would say we were running aluminum conduit, we were up in the air about 80, 90 feet and of course we had all the safety equipment, but it was [00:21:00] interesting to be within this web of steel, running conduit in this sign tower. Then every morning, after I finished the job, just to walk by it and to see that the signs were up and the lights ... that I did that job was sometimes I pass it to this day and I'm amazed by it. I really am.

Jaime: Could you tell me one of the most memorable moments with Tommy Pellatieri?

Michael: One of the most memorable moments, we were working at [00:21:30] the Masonic Temple on 23rd Street, between 5th and 6th Avenue and they were upgrading their electric, so we were putting up new feeders. We were putting up this



one 500,000 feeder, four of them, four inch conduit and I would say like a hundred foot run, we were pulling from downstairs up, so we had a couple of crazy bends in it, and the last bend was [00:22:00] a 90. At the time, we would have a pulling machine called a Super Tugger, and on the Super Tugger, it had a gauge and on the gauge it had the resistance. When it went into the red, you should back off a little bit, but we were under the gun and the run was getting a little tight and the needle was starting to go into the red, and Tommy was telling me, "Michael, we better back off a little bit", and I'm like, "Tommy, let's go, we're almost there, let's pull it, let's pull [00:22:30] it."

Well, the needle went red and sure as heck, Tommy was right, we pulled the pull box and the 90 off the wall and it was quite a scary moment for us. So what we had to do was we had to pull some of the wire back and put in a splice box and then we finished the run. From then on, I took Tommy Pellatieri's advice from then on.

Jaime: You never questioned Tommy-

Michael: Never again.

Jaime: Over the years, I've gotten to hear some amazing stories [00:23:00] from you Michael, but one of my favorite stories, it wasn't even you that told me, it was John [Palzado 00:23:07]. Could you tell me the stories about the stashes?

Michael: Well John's a hell of a nice guy, great foreman also. There's this one building, I think it's on 53rd Street, I'm not sure of the address, but it was fairly a brand new building and in the lobby, they have four or five statues, but they didn't have heads, [00:23:30] it was like a Venus de Milo type statue.

John and I were journeymen at the time, and we were under the gun to get this one job done, and the freight was amazingly packed. All we had was our tools, and a small cardboard box with material, so I said to John, I said, "Let's see if we can get in through the lobby." So we proceeded to go through the lobby and of course, we're stopping at a security guard and he says, "Where do you think you two guys [00:24:00] are going?" I says, "Well", I says, "well listen, we're under emergency here, we have the heads for the statue, we're going to be gluing them on." So he says, "Oh, I didn't know that", and he led us right through and we were able to go up to the floor and do our job and get it done in a record time. Thinking back on that, it was quite funny.

Jaime: You've always found the way to circumvene some of the limitations on the job.

Michael: Yes, I did circumvent, yeah. Rules [00:24:30] can be bent, they're not made to be broken, but they can be bent in some ways. I learned a lot from a lot of the journeymen, like I said the little nuances that I've learned from all the people I've

worked with came to fruition and helped me out a lot, it really did. It really did. Plus having a pretty good personality.

Jaime: Very good personality, very good. I know you've given me tools over the year, tools [00:25:00] that we needed for the job, you allowed me to keep them, I've used them in the field. Anybody ever given you a tool or handed you down a tool?

Michael: Basically, I would say my Uncle John, I have his toolbox from when he retired. I don't use them, it's just like almost like a shrine to it, so, and I do treasure them as something I would never part with actually.

Jaime: Could you express some of the [00:25:30] emotions that go around with having those tools?

Michael: Well my uncle was an amazing man, I learned a lot from him. I guess memories are probably the strongest thing in your mind and a lot of times if I'm not feeling in the best mood and I'm downstairs in my workshop and I'll come across his toolbox, I'll open it up and go through it and it helps me a lot. It helps relieve some stress because [00:26:00] he was, like I said, a wonderful gentleman and a tremendous journeyman, and I learned a lot from him and to know that his hands touched these tools and I'm feeling them, touching them myself, was a wonderful thing.

Jaime: In your opinion, what does it mean to be a union member? Union electrician.

Michael: It means a lot. I never really gave it much thought before I was in the union, but after almost 43 [00:26:30] years in, I've learned to love Local 3 and I am so grateful for the life that they've given me. Not only in just the education of learning a trade, but just the knowledge that they've given me of safety and how to proceed, work safely, and basically it's not so much for them, they're looking out for me. As I've gotten [00:27:00] older, I really didn't give much thought to benefits, but as I've gotten older and had children, benefits are an amazing thing, just medical alone. To know that they've given me these benefits ... for example, when it was time for my children to have braces, it was hard, it was almost impossible and I didn't think I was going to be able to do that for them, but believe it or not, in our dental plan, we had some [00:27:30] money for braces. So I was able to give my children a better life with that too and now they have wonderful, straight teeth, thanks to Local 3.

Jaime: Speaking about safety, was there ever a scary moment or something that you were, a tool you were afraid of or something that was dangerous in your career?

Michael: Yes, as a matter of fact, we were discussing this this morning. A lot of buildings use different voltages, step different voltage. In one building, [00:28:00] matter of fact the building we're in now at 11 Penn, the Con Edison service is just 250

volts, so a lot of their air conditioning equipment and heavy equipment runs on 550 volts, and that's the first time I saw a Delta transformer, where you literally take the low voltage coming in and step it up to 550 volts, but the odd thing about it is in the Delta is a triangle, so those points of the triangle [00:28:30] are your three different phases. On one of the phases, we literally ground that phase to [building 00:28:36] steel, so turning on for the first time that, and following the print was frightening for me. Just knowing that this leg that carries voltage is going to ground. But from going to school and theory, you learn that it's [00:29:00] not going to cause any problems, but just the physical aspect of it is amazing and for the first time very frightening.

Jaime: Right, turning it on.

Michael: Yes.

Jaime: Over the 42, almost 43 years of your career, you've seen a lot of change in the industry. Can you express some of the changes that you like or dislike?

Michael: Sure. I've noticed that the industry [00:29:30] has become a lot safer. I credit Local 3 with that, because like when I first started in the business, there was no such thing as Lockout-Tagout. There was no such thing as respirators and masks. We just went in there and did what we had to do. Over the years, courses came available and safety initiatives came into play and [00:30:00] looking at it, I would say that's the biggest change that I've seen coming in the business is safety, which is a great thing, which is a great thing.

Also on the negative side, I would say that a lot of General Contractors, I don't want to use the word unscrupulous, but I will. Their tendencies to push for deadlines that are really unreasonable, I've come to [00:30:30] dislike that very much, and fast track. You know what I mean? You need a reasonable amount time to do a correct and safe installation, and I feel like they try to compromise us on that.

Jaime: How about tools? Do you remember some of the tools you used to use as opposed to some of the tools you use now?

Michael: When I first came in the business, if we had to hang, we call them bantam plugs now, back then they were called raw [00:31:00] plugs. If you needed to drill in a bantam plug or raw plug, now we use a hammer drill. Back when I first started, there was a little hand bit that you had to hit with a hammer and rotate ten degrees and keep turning and almost like chop it in. A lot of times it was just a slight little like a chisel, maybe a one inch diameter head that you had to hit, a lot of times you missed it and hit your hand. If you were lucky, [00:31:30] the contractor gave you one with a big piece of rubber around it. But that was the biggest change and now, where everything is battery, it's wonderful. It's wonderful.

Jaime: What's your favorite tool? I know you have a variety of tools, but what are some of your favorites?

Michael: My favorite tool is the cordless mini man bandsaw. It is an amazing product. It's light, you can cut tubing with it, you can cut just about anything, anything with [00:32:00] it.

Jaime: Along the lines of tools, what are some of your biggest pet peeves about tools?

Michael: Well my first contractor, again, getting back to when it was a small contractor, one on one, when we used a drill at the end of the day, it went back into its box, the cord was tightened up, everything fit back in the box it came in, and it was put back in the truck. Now, [00:32:30] I noticed that a lot of tools are just thrown into the gang box and the cases that they come in just end up in dumpsters. So that's, I would say that's my biggest pet peeve.

Jaime: What about pet peeves with installations?

Michael: Again, a lot of times I don't like to take shortcuts, I guess when we do temporary light. A lot of times, [00:33:00] back then we used to crimp the wires, I find that a lot better than using a scotch locks or something because a lot of trades, they'll plug into the pigtails and just they just yank them out, so a lot of times the scotch lock, it'll come out, but years ago when we first made temps on a job, there was a crimp so we crimped it on and there was a Buchanan cap, a plastic cap that went over it. I would like to see that again.

Jaime: For temporary-

Michael: For temporary, yeah. [00:33:30] Actually when I first came into the business, God, I'm really dating myself now. After we made a splice, we would solder it and use a Buchanan cap to cap that. I would love to see that again, 'cause that's a really tight ... there's no room for error on that.

Jaime: In the same essence of change in your career, what are some of the things that you've embraced throughout the [00:34:00] years? Change-wise.

Michael: Change-wise? Safety. Definitely I thought it was a hassle in the beginning, going after work for these classes, but once you sit in the class and you understand the premise of it, safety is just as paramount of importance as good tools are and an intelligent journeyman.

Jaime: [00:34:30] Have you ever been given a compliment by an employer or a contractor on the job as [inaudible 00:34:41]?

Michael: Yes. I remember the first time I was a young foreman, I was doing a floor, and beginning of the kick off meeting, the General Contractor, it was a high profile, it might have been for Tiffany's [00:35:00] Jewelry Store on 57th Street, and the General Contractor said that, "On this job, we'll have no punch list." That's something that I've never, ever seen. There's always something on a punch list at the end of a job, be it a plate missing, or you know, nothing major. So we finished the job, we kept the schedule, and true to my word, there was no punch list. At the end of the job, the contractor came [00:35:30] to me, took me to lunch actually, and said he was very proud of me that I was the only trade on that job that didn't have the punch list. So that was one of my proudest moments as a young foreman.

Jaime: What about meaningful? Has any job ever felt specifically meaningful, especially meaningful?

Michael: Yes. When I was like third year apprentice, I worked for this one contractor they were called Running Electric, and we had some pretty [00:36:00] high profile customers, and believe it or not, I was able to work in John Lennon's apartment in the Dakota on 72nd Street and Central Park. First of all just the building alone was an amazement to architecture alone and just the opportunity to see John Lennon who was one of my, I guess, an idol I guess I would say as a musician. Just to see [00:36:30] him every morning was a thrill. As a matter of fact, I would see him every morning, he'd be at the table having coffee and I would call him, "Good morning Mr. Lennon" and of course he would say, "Please call me John." And one morning I said to him, "You know John", I said, "Life is strange" and he goes, "What do you mean by that?" I said, "For years I paid to see you, and now you're paying to see me", so he got the biggest kick out of it. I guess we became somewhat friends [00:37:00] and he was an interesting person. Unfortunately he died a tragic death, but that I guess was one of my most memorable ones.

I also worked in Margaret Meade's apartment. She was an author and very intelligent woman, so it was very good to interact with her and I worked in Pablo Picasso's apartment on 5th Avenue and just to see his artwork and [00:37:30] to talk to someone with the artistic talent like that was just an honor actually.

Jaime: Coming from that background, I know that you still have aspirations to continue doing some type of work. Could you give us the title of what your company may be when you leave the business?

Michael: When I retire, I still like to be somewhat active, because you do need structure when you do retire. So I've come up with a little [00:38:00] thing, I'd like to be known as Meticulous Mike, Electrician to the Stars.

Jaime: Handyman [crosstalk 00:38:07]

Michael: Handyman extraordinaire. That's why I'd like to-

Jaime: There's some of the things that I've known that you've described yourself to be. One of them is biggest calves in Local 3.

Michael: Yes. I loved the game of soccer. When I first moved to New Jersey, I tried out for football [00:38:30] and it just didn't agree with me, so I looked at the other field and I see these guys in shorts kicking the ball, I says you know what, I'm going to give that a try. So I had a very good skill in soccer and over the years, my calves have grown quite large. When I entered Local 3, that was my claim to fame. I believe I had the largest calves in circumference of course, from 1977, 78, and 79. [00:39:00] Three years running.

Jaime: There's also another description that you use, self-proclaimed of course.

Michael: Well, I hate to taut myself, but I like to think of myself as the King of Electricity, but of course the title is self-proclaimed.

Jaime: That's pretty good. It's not too far from the truth, Mike.

Michael: Thank you very much.

Jaime: I feel that you are King of Electricity.

Michael: Coming from you, I'll take it as a compliment. Thank you very much.

Jaime: There was something else that I was [00:39:30] thinking about. I know you spent so many years, but these things always come back to me and I always think about them. It makes me feel good Michael, to be able to work by your side.

Michael: Well Jaime, from the first moment I saw you as a young apprentice, I knew that you were going to turn out to be a great journeyman. And you are, you really are. And a wonderful human being.

Jaime: Thank you very much. What kind of advice would you give somebody starting out [00:40:00] in your field today?

Michael: I would say just ask a lot of questions, absorb, try to learn something every day because it's a wonderful industry, it's a great trade. I often wondered in the beginning older men would call journeymen 'mechanics' and I would feel taken aback, because I would think of a mechanic as somebody who worked on cars, but over [00:40:30] the years, I've learned that we are mechanics. We could almost engineer ... we can invent methods and little nuances and tools and just use methods that are

almost engineered from our mind and our experience, so now I'm honored to consider myself a mechanic and King of Electricity of course.

Jaime: [inaudible 00:40:57] In [00:41:00] the future, do you think that your children or members of the community are going to do the same type of work that you're doing?

Michael: Unfortunately no, I don't think so, but I believe that I've taught my children the importance of unions in this country and what it's like to be a union worker. In a way, my legacy will be perpetuated by them, not so much in the industry, but in their fields. [00:41:30] My daughter's a teacher and I believe she's taken a lot of inspiration from me.

Jaime: What about other people in the community, you think electrical work is still going to be around in the future?

Michael: Yes. Definitely. It'll always be. One of the things that I've noticed over the years, the electrician is the first one on the job, and the last one to leave it. So it's not only a great trade, but we're on the job site the longest.

Jaime: Do [00:42:00] you feel electricians are underpaid, fairly paid, or overpaid?

Michael: I think we're fairly paid as members of Local 3. Non-union is a whole nother story. I believe they're underpaid and exploited. That's why I'm so grateful to be a member of Local 3. I believe that Local 3 has given me a fair wage throughout my entire career, and wonderful opportunities.

Jaime: [00:42:30] I have this one more question, but before I get into my last questions. I know a couple other stories that I love about that you've told me before. One of them is when you were an apprentice, you were the first apprentice, the only apprentice, to ever take furlough. Could you tell me how that happened?

Michael: I hope this doesn't go on my record.

Jaime: I think you're going to be alright.

Michael: Okay, thank [00:43:00] you. Well when I was a second year apprentice, I was working for a small shop in the Bronx, and the owner was very nice. The contractor was very nice, and that summer, my friends and I, we had the opportunity of renting a kite store at the Jersey shore at the beach. It's something I love. I love the ocean, I love being outside. And I went to the contractor and I asked him if I could have the summer off after apprentice school ended. [00:43:30] He agreed after some slight prodding, and he put me on furlough. So from June, I believe it was 1977, to September of 1977, I was the only apprentice in Local 3 to be on furlough.

That didn't come to bite me until I had to take my 'a' test. I thought I skated by when I turned in my jay and took the test and became [00:44:00] an MIJ, so I took my 'a' test, and all my friends were getting their a cards, and unfortunately I received a letter in the mail requesting my presence up at the Local one night. So after some time in the waiting room, they call me in and they had this big binder with my work record and this gentleman said to me, "You know Mike, you have a very impressive work record here", and I says, "Well thank you, I pride myself on it". He goes, "But there's [00:44:30] just one thing Mike, it says here that as a second year apprentice that you were on furlough for three months. Can you please explain that because Local 3's been around for quite some time and never, ever has an apprentice been on furlough, only journeymen."

Well, I was quite taken a back at the time, and I tried to think very quickly. Now, Harry Van Arsdale, who was our mentor of our union, our leader, [00:45:00] always stressed education. So I made up a white lie and I told the gentleman that my parents were going to Europe that summer and I went along as educational and it would help me in my career at Local 3 in the future. Well, he closed the book at that moment and looked at me very seriously, and he said, "That's a very good answer, but unfortunately son, that's an incomplete year", [00:45:30] so they were kind enough to give me my 'a' card in six months, but it was a rough six months. But I guess looking back on it, being the only apprentice ever to be on Local 3 was worth those six months.

Jaime: There's one other story that I always remember Michael, is the life saving award. Could you tell us about the life saving award please?

Michael: I was doing two floors at 1221 6th Avenue, McGraw Hill was the [00:46:00] customer. One of the floors was pretty much finished, and we had some Saturday work on another floor, so we were coring on another floor, so I had to go up to my office that I had on the finished floor to get some material and get my prints. As I came out, there were other contractors, Local 3 contractors doing the data work, so they must have been smoking, and threw a [00:46:30] cigarette into a dumpster, and in the dumpster was cove based adhesive. Cove based adhesive is quite flammable.

When I came out of my little cubby holed office, I noticed that the whole space was dark. I said to myself, "Why did someone shut the lights?" Well, it wasn't lights. It was smoke and huge flames coming out of this dumpster. So the guys that were in the computer room, they had no idea this was going on, so I banged on the [00:47:00] wall, and alerted everyone to this emergency, we pulled the fire alarm, and the other foreman from the data company and I, we grabbed one of those hoses that's in the hallway, the standpipe hoses, we turned it on. Quite a bit of pressure came out of that hose, and we put the fire out. So we were given letters of accommodation by the building for doing that and I [00:47:30] figured we were going to get rewarded by the Local.



We both got these letters to come down to the midtown office which was located around 23rd, 24th Street and Lexington Avenue, I said to the other foreman, I says, "WE better dress nice because we're going to get our pictures taken, we're going to be in the union world, and we're going to get the life saving award. Well, much to my dismay, they took us into a room and they [00:48:00] gave us quite a good lecture on how we should just abandon the building and be safe. After being bereaved at our yelled at for 15, 20 minutes, they asked us if we had any questions. Being my personality, I raised my hand and I asked a question, and I asked, I said to the business agent, I said, "Does this mean we're not getting the life [00:48:30] saving award?"

Well he said a few words that I can't repeat and asked us to leave at the time, so, no, I never received the life saving awarded for that.

Jaime: I'm sorry, I'm sorry to hear. You definitely deserved it.

Michael: Thank you very much.

Jaime: Mike, I only have ... you know I want to ask you a million things because over the years, I've heard all these things and it's impossible to get it all in in this short period of time, just an amazing amount of stories that I've heard and I [00:49:00] admire, but right now, I just want to ask you one more thing. What inspires you?

Michael: What inspires me? Just life in general. I love life. I love being alive, I'm grateful for my health, I'm grateful for having the opportunity to be in Local 3 and to be a journeyman and to be a general foreman. From a kid who didn't know anything, to attain, to have [00:49:30] that general foreman's card and to see the responsibilities that I do have amazes me. It just gives me that energy to push on. Physically, I'm pretty much had it. It's a physical trade, no doubt about it, I knew it when I came in, but at 62, it catches up with you. So I'm grateful to have my benefits to know that I'm going to have a wonderful retirement, [00:50:00] and I'm looking forward to that. And coming back and having lunch with guys like you, and being in touch with my friends.

Jaime: Be good Mike. I want to congratulate you on your career-

Michael: Thank you very much.

Jaime: ... for what you've accomplished, and I want to thank you for participating. Is there anything else that you want to add, anything that you want to ask me?

Michael: Actually, it's been my pleasure and I just want to thank you for being a wonderful journeyman and a good friend over the years, and I [00:50:30] would like to ask you to take over my position now that I retire. That would be a wonderful thing.

Jaime: I will graciously accept that.

Michael:           Excellent.

Jaime: I'll try to do the best I can to represent you in the best light of course.

Michael:           I think that superintendents should have a little more critique, I'm trying to think of the word, criteria, a high criteria [00:51:00] to be a superintendent. I think if you want to attain that level, because only half percent of our union becomes superintendents, and I believe they should be held to certain higher standards. I see a lot of superintendents in our business now that I'm not very proud of. So I'd like to see a higher standard for superintendents.

                  When I came into the business, they were the ultimate gentleman, so I'd like to see a higher standard for that.

Jaime: [00:51:30] Very good, Mike. I'm going to shut off the recorder.

Michael:           Okay. Thank you.

Jaime: We shut off the recorder but we forgot about Michael's history. Can you tell us about Studio 54?

Michael:           I was very lucky in the 70s to be involved with two renovations of Studio 54. That was huge in the 70s, disco was booming. [00:52:00] So not only, I call myself the King of Electricity now, but back then I called myself Disco Mike, the guy you like. So we did quite a bit of work in there and it was extremely interesting. As a matter of fact, I was always there early in the morning because there was always parties going on from the night before. One time I went in there and they had this party for Dolly Parton, who was a country western singer. [00:52:30] There was bales of hay, and goats, and sheep running around the place at the time. Another time, I came in early in the morning, and the Rolling Stones were passed out on the floor. Mick Jagger and them, they were there, yeah. So it was interesting. It was great. It was one of the most memorable-

Jaime: What about the whistle Michael?

Michael:           Well as you know, at the time, I don't know if you know the whistle became very big in the disco. Prior to that, I was a lifeguard, so [00:53:00] when I was able to get into Studio 54 on the guest list, I used to bring my whistle, my lifeguard whistle 'cause it was on my key chain. I used to blow the whistle when we were dancing. So about six months later, a disco song came out and in the song was the whistle, so I do take credit for inventing any whistle in any type of disco song, so that is definitely mine.

Jaime: What's [00:53:30] the other thing that you take credit for?

Michael: Well in our first interview, you knew I liked the beach and I like the sun, I always liked the sun. So I played softball a lot in Central Park for Local 3 and for other teams. So I really liked the sun. So what I did was I used to put my hat on backwards and this way the visor wasn't blocked by the sun, so I would get a little bit of a tan. So that was my thing, I always wore my hat backwards. [00:54:00] Well, I would say like five or six years later, to this day as a matter of fact, 2017, everybody wears their hat backwards. Again, I do take credit for that.

Jaime: Definitely.

Michael: Definitely, definitely. The whistle in the disco and the hat backwards.

Jaime: Of course. Anything else?

Michael: I think that's about all I invented, the two things that I do take credit for.

Jaime: I remember you told me that you invented something else, I can't recall what it is.

Michael: There's many, many things, I'm a multifaceted person. I'm [00:54:30] like an onion, a lot of layers.

Jaime: Thank you again Michael, I wanted to make sure that we got on the recording Studio 54.

Michael: Disco Mike, the guy you like.

Jaime: Very good.

Michael: Thank you again.

Jaime: Thank you.

Michael: Alright.